



E
241
94D2

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

Chap. E 241

Shelf .C94 D2

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.



HISTORY OF THE BATTLE

OF THE

CROOKED BILLET,

FOUGHT MAY 1st, 1778.

✓
BY W. W. H. DAVIS, A. M.

PRICE 25 CENTS.

4
3168

The proceeds of sale to be applied to the erection of a Monument
upon the field of battle.

PRINTED AT THE DEMOCRAT OFFICE,

DOYLESTOWN, PA.

1860.

Van der Meulen



BATTLE OF THE CROOKED BILLET.

THE Winter of 1777 and '78, and the following Spring, were among the most trying periods in our revolutionary struggle. The preceding campaign in the Middle States, had been disastrous in the extreme to the American arms. Defeated at Brandywine, forced to retreat at Germantown, Fort Mifflin destroyed, and Philadelphia occupied by the victorious British army, military operations for the season closed with but little hope for the success of the patriot cause. When Winter set in, Washington, with his shattered battalions, marched up the banks of the Schuylkill and sought shelter upon the bleak hills around the Valley Forge. Here this incomparable chieftain remained for several months, contending against an enemy more inexorable than British bayonet or Hessian sabre, watching General Howe and his troops in their comfortable quarters.

Washington found it necessary to have the country between the Schuylkill and Delaware rivers, and extending some thirty miles back from the British lines, well patrolled, to prevent supplies reaching the enemy in Philadelphia, and to break up their marauding and foraging excursions into the interior. For this purpose a considerable body of militia was kept actively employed during the Winter and Spring under a reliable officer. Early in January, 1778, he appointed to this command John Lacey, who had lately been commissioned a Brigadier General by the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania. General Lacey was a native of Buckingham township, Bucks county, in this State, and at this period was but twenty-two years of age. He had served during the campaign of 1776 on the Canada frontier under Wayne, in whose regiment he held a Captain's commission; whence he returned home and resigned. During the following year he was in active service as Colonel of a Bucks county regiment, and with which he participated in the battle of Germantown, and the action at the Gulf Mills. He had gained such high reputation for skill and courage, that Washington now called him to this command, one of the most responsible that can devolve upon an officer.

General Lacey immediately entered upon the discharge of his new

duties. Soon after he assumed command of his brigade the Commander-in-Chief, from his winter quarters, addressed him the following letter, which embodies, substantially, his instructions :

HEAD-QUARTERS, *Valley Forge*, Jan. 23, 1778.

SIR,—I received your favor dated the 21st inst. I must request that you will exert yourself to fulfil the intention of keeping a body of troops in the country where you are posted. Protecting the inhabitants is one of the ends designed, and preventing supplies and intercourse with the enemy and city is the other. This, perhaps, with the utmost vigilance cannot be totally effected ; but I must entreat you to take every step that may render it possible. As to the reduction of your numbers, I wish you to make timely application to the President of the State, to keep up the necessary force under your command.

I am well informed that many persons, under the pretence of furnishing the inhabitants of Germantown, and near the enemy's lines, afford immense supplies to the Philadelphia market—a conduct highly prejudicial to us, and contrary to every order. It is therefore become proper to make an example of some guilty one, that the rest may expect a like fate, should they persist. This I am determined to put into execution ; and request you when a suitable object falls into your hands, that you will send him here with a witness ; or let me know his name, when you shall have power to try, and (if proved guilty) to execute. This you will be pleased to make known to the people, that they may again have warning. Your want of whiskey I cannot remedy—we are in the same situation here, and nothing effectual can be done until the arrival of the Committee of Congress, whom we expect every day.

I am, sir,

Your most humble servant,

(Signed,)

GEO. WASHINGTON.

Upon taking the field he established his Head-Quarters at Graeme Park, on the County line, near where that road crosses the Doylestown and Willow Grove turnpike, and fixed his depot of provisions at Doylestown, where he stationed a small guard for their protection. Considering the former situation too much exposed, he soon afterward changed his quarters to Rodman's Farm, in Warwick township, where he continued them until about the first of March, when he moved down the York Road to the Crooked Billet, where he encamped. At this time his whole force was but little over three hundred men, made up entirely of raw militia, many of whom were badly armed and equipped. From this place he marched to Whitemarsh, where he encamped on the 11th of March. He remained only a few days in camp here, when he again moved up toward the Neshaminy, in order to protect the mills along that stream, many of which were grinding grain for the army. Some of them had a large stock of grain and flour on hand,

and it was feared the enemy might make a sudden foray and destroy them.

On the 19th of March, he placed Lieutenant Robert Vanhorn, of Southampton township, Bucks county, in command of a troop of horse, with the following instructions for his guidance :

CAMP, March 19th, 1778.

SIR :—You are to proceed with your troop toward the enemy's lines—to keep on the roads leading to Bristol, to Smithfield, the York and the Whitemarsh roads. You will keep constant patrols on these roads, by night and day ; and if the enemy should come out, you will immediately send me notice. If your parties should meet with any people going to market, or any persons whatever going to the city, and they endeavor to make their escape, you will order your men to fire upon the villains. You will leave such on the roads, their bodies and their marketing lying together. This I wish you to execute on the first offenders you meet, that they may be a warning to others. You are to let no person whatever go to the city. You are to stay on the lines until further orders. You will send me word of your movements, and what information you can get from the enemy, every day, by one of the troop.

I am, sir,

Your most obdt.,

(Signed,)

J. LACEY.

To Mr. VANHORN,
Commanding the Light-Horse.

During this season General Lacey and his small party were very active in scouring the country for many miles around Philadelphia. His force at some times was so much reduced that he was obliged to keep them in one body, and head them himself, in expeditions against the enemy. He was closely watched by the British and Tories, and, as the spring opened, they were more active than ever in their exertions to capture him. In order to avoid surprise, he frequently changed his camp, and would not remain in some localities more than two or three days. By being thus constantly on his guard, he escaped the parties of the enemy who were sent out to surprise him.

By the end of March, the intercourse with the enemy in Philadelphia had reached such a height, and become so injurious to the cause of the colonies, that it was held in serious consideration to depopulate the whole country between the Delaware and the Schuylkill rivers, for fifteen miles around the city, by compelling the inhabitants, by force, to remove back beyond that distance. A conference was held on this subject, at the Spring House, on the 23d instant, between Generals McIntosh and Lacey, and several field-officers of the army. They agreed upon the benefit the cause of independence would derive from the measure, and General McIntosh was authorized to lay the plan

before General Washington, on his return to head quarters. General Lacey also addressed him on the same subject, on the 29th, in which communication appears the following paragraph, which exhibits the bad state of things :

“ Every kind of villainy is carried on by the people near the enemy's lines ; and, from their general conduct, I am induced to believe but few real friends to America are left within ten miles of Philadelphia. Those who have appeared the least active, have either been made prisoners by the enemy, or compelled to fly to some other part of the country for safety. I have a number of notorious offenders now confined, who were taken by my parties, going to market.”

The battle of the Crooked Billet, now Hatborough, Montgomery county, Pennsylvania, was fought on the first day of May, 1778. General Lacey had his head-quarters at this place most of the time from the period when he returned with his command from Whitemarsh, about the middle of March, to the day of the action. He was actively engaged, meanwhile, in scouring the country in pursuit of parties of refugees and British troops, and in endeavoring to cut off all intercourse with the city.

The American troops were encamped in or near a large wood at the upper end of the Crooked Billet, on the farm of Samuel Irvine, and now owned by William K. Goentner. In his front the wood extended some three or four hundred yards along the York road, and a greater distance to the east, and contained about twenty-five acres. In his rear there was an open, cultivated, country, for more than a half mile, to the county line, with a small body of timber, about midway to that road. General Lacey was quartered in a stone house, about three hundred yards to the right and rear of his encampment, on the opposite side of the York road. It was then owned by a man named Gilbert, but now belongs to John M. Hogeland. There is a difference of opinion as to the house in which Lacey was quartered ; some contending it was that of the late Asa Comly, some distance higher up the road, and then owned by John Tompkins. But from the most reliable information we have been able to obtain, as well as the situation of the premises, we feel confident he was quartered in the house of Mr. Hogeland. The wood in front of the encampment until it was lately cut down, showed traces of spoliation by the troops, in order to obtain fuel ; the new growth of trees, in the place of those cut down, being much smaller than in other parts of the wood. Lacey was joined the evening before the attack by a body of militia, without arms, who fared badly the next day. The exact number of the Americans has never been rightly ascertained, but is supposed not to have exceed-

ed four hundred in all, who were raw militia. He took the necessary measures to prevent a surprise, and if his orders had been faithfully carried out by those upon whom they devolved, he would not have been found by the enemy unprepared to meet them. The evening before he gave orders for the patrols, under two commissioned officers, of whom Lieutenant Neilson was one, to leave the camp between two and three o'clock the next morning, scour the country toward the enemy's lines, and report to him the first intimation of their approach. They did not leave camp, however, until near daylight, and when they met the enemy neglected to give the alarm. Under these circumstances the Americans were taken entirely by surprise.

The commander-in-chief of the British army had for some time deemed it of importance to attack and disperse the force of General Lacey, which had, during the winter and spring, done them much harm, by stopping the communication between the city and country, and thus prevented the people carrying their produce to market. Major Simcoe, the commander of the "Queen's Rangers," an active refugee corps, which had made many incursions into the surrounding country, had it in contemplation to surprise Lacey's camp. He laid his plans before Colonel Balfour, and asked his co-operation. Spies were immediately sent into Lacey's neighborhood, and all his movements closely watched; every information which they obtained being immediately communicated to these British officers. A few days after their first interview, Balfour informed Simcoe that General Lacey was to be at the Billet, with his corps, on the first day of May, and furnished him such other information as would be of service to him. Simcoe laid this intelligence before General Howe, who approved his plans and gave him permission to attack the Americans; and, from his superior knowledge of the country and the roads, upon him devolved the duty of making the necessary arrangements to insure success. His plan was, to march with the Queen's Rangers and attack Lacey on the left and rear, and thus cut off his communication with the upper country; while another body of British troops should ambuscade themselves in a wood on the road from the Billet to the Horsham meeting-house, which runs in the direction of the Valley Forge. It was supposed, if Lacey should be defeated, he would march toward the main army, and that this ambuscade placed in the wood for that purpose, would effectually cut off his retreat. Simcoe was to begin the attack, and when the firing of the Rangers should be heard in the rear another body was to move up in front, thus placing the Americans between two fires; and, acting in concert, it was supposed they

would be able to accomplish their object without much difficulty. In addition to the Queen's Rangers, under Simcoe, there was selected for this enterprise a large detachment of light infantry and cavalry, the whole under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Abercrombie. Spare horses were led, in order to mount the infantry, if necessary, for greater expedition. Having made all the preliminary arrangements, the morning of the first day of May was fixed upon as the time for attack, and the troops ordered to hold themselves in readiness.

The British troops left Philadelphia the afternoon before, under the direction of guides who were well acquainted with the country. They marched out the Second Street road, and up the Middle road through the Fox Chase to the village of Huntingdon, where the force separated. The main body, composed of the light infantry and most of the cavalry, commanded by Abercrombie in person, struck across to the York road, and so on up to Horsham, in order to form the proposed ambuscade, and also attack Lacey in front. Simcoe continued his march up the Middle road, occasionally making a detour to avoid such places as Lacey's men might chance to be at, thus prolonging the distance he had to march. He turned to the left into the Byberry road, along which he marched to what is now known as Lloyd's Corner, when he again changed his direction, by turning into the road which runs from the Willow Grove to the county line. At the first cross-roads, where Archibald Banes used to live, he again turned to the left, and came out into the county line a short distance above the eight-square school-house. Just above this point he struck across the fields, on the farm of Isaac Boileau, the nearest way to the Billet. The instructions to Captain Kerr's division, which marched with Major Simcoe, were to seize and barricade Lacey's quarters, and hold them as a rallying point, in case of any discomfiture. They were so exceedingly anxious to capture Lacey, that they placed spies in the apple-trees around his quarters to watch his movements; but, fortunately, he escaped without being discovered. Simcoe, during the night, fell in with Captain Thomas's company of armed refugees, which he would certainly have mistaken for Americans, and attacked them, had he not received information about twilight that they were in the neighborhood. But for this knowledge, a serious episode to the British might have happened. Both parties marched as rapidly as possible in order to reach their destination while under cover of darkness, and commence the attack at or near the same time. Simcoe marched with such caution that he escaped all Lacey's patrols; but daylight appeared when he was some distance from the American camp. The officer who com-

manded the party in ambush met one of the patrols within two miles of the American camp, who, when fired upon, fled in a contrary direction. The patrol, which left camp about daylight, was divided into three parts; that under Lieutenant Neilson took the right hand road from the Billet, leading to Horsham, and on which the ambush was placed. After proceeding about a mile and a half, they first saw the enemy's light-horse, when they took post in a wood to fire upon them when they should come within reach. Soon they saw a party of foot following, when Lieutenant Neilson ordered a soldier, named John Morrow, to return to camp and give the alarm. He did so, and when he arrived there he found the men already paraded behind the camp, and fell into the ranks with them; but he was too late to save them from surprise. A second scout, which went in another direction, was commanded by Ensign Laughlin. They marched about two miles without discovering any thing of the enemy; when they returned and were close to the camp, when they first heard the firing. Abercrombie, fearing he should not be in time to support Simcoe, detached the cavalry and mounted infantry to the place of ambuscade, in advance, and with the main body marched up the York road to attack the Americans in front. From the manner in which Lacey was surrounded, Abercrombie must have detached a party up the Easton road, to turn his right flank and fall upon his rear, in concert with the Queen's Rangers. They probably came into the York road where the county line crosses it, and were the cavalry which is mentioned as having attacked him on the left flank, soon after he commenced his retreat. He mentions, in his dispatch to General Armstrong, that one party of the enemy passed the cross-roads in his rear before his scout got there.

The first intimation General Lacey had of the approach of the enemy was at daylight in the morning, when they were within about two hundred yards of his camp. He was in bed, and had barely time to dress, mount his horse and join his men, before they were within musket shot of his quarters. He discovered the enemy in front and rear near the same time, who opened a fire upon him, some being sheltered behind fences and in the neighboring houses. His situation was a critical one, and as there was no time left for speculation as to the course he should pursue, he was obliged to act upon the emergency of the occasion. Seeing himself almost surrounded, and the enemy's force much superior to his own, he deemed it injudicious to make a stand against them, and therefore ordered a retreat. He moved in columns to the left, in the direction of a wood, his wagons following in his rear, across open fields and in full view of the enemy, who were

in pursuit. He relates that when he emerged into the open fields, and a large body of the enemy's horse appeared in front, his men gave him an anxious look, as much as to ask him what they should do. He told them to "deliver their fire and push on." After marching a short distance, his flanking parties first began to exchange shots with the enemy, which grew warmer and warmer as they advanced, and soon he was hotly engaged. He moved on across the fields, in tolerable order until he reached the wood, where he was obliged to make a stand to open his way, as by this time the various parties of the enemy had come up, and now attacked him on all sides. In his report of the action to Washington, he says: "I kept moving on till I made the wood, when a party of both horse and foot came up the Byberry road, and attacked my right flank—the party from the Billet fell upon my rear—the horse from the rear of my camp came upon my left flank, and a body of horse appeared directly in front." The enemy now began to concentrate all their force upon the wood, and being still much exposed and having suffered considerable loss, General Lacey thought it would be safer to move on, which he did with the loss of all his baggage, which fell into the enemy's hands. It was Simcoe with his rangers and cavalry who appeared on Lacey's right flank and front, about the time he reached the wood. When he had quitted the main road and struck across the fields, to march directly to the Billet, and was informing the officers of his plan of attack, he heard firing in the direction of Abercrombie's detachment, and exclaimed, "The dragoons have discovered us," and marched forward at a rapid pace to join in the action. He came up on the right flank of the retreating Americans, as has been already mentioned, intercepting in his march small parties of the flying militiamen, who were mostly killed. While he pushed on for the main body of the Americans, he dispatched thirty dragoons to intercept the baggage of General Lacey, which they succeeded in doing, as it was crossing the fields. As the Americans were marching through the wood Major Simcoe endeavored, by a *ruse de guerre*, to induce them to lay down their arms. He rode up within hailing distance, and commanded them to surrender. As they did not stop, he next gave the commands, in a loud tone, "make ready"—"present"—"fire"—hoping to deceive them into the belief that he had a large body of troops with him. In this he was disappointed; they moved on as before, and paid no other attention to him than to bow their heads at the word—"fire." They continued to retreat, skirmishing as they marched, for nearly two miles, the British hanging upon their flanks and rear, and now and then a man falling—

killed or wounded. They passed across the farm of Thomas Craven, now owned by Mr. Finney, thence through what is now the village of Johnsville, in Warminster township, Bucks county, and so on nearly to Hart's Corner, on the Bristol road, where they suddenly turned to the left into a wood, and thus escaped the pursuit. Thence they struck across the country to the York road, which they came into just below the Cross Roads, now Hartsville, and moved down toward the Billet, hoping to find the enemy, in the hour of victory, off their guard and thus be able to gain some advantage over them. They found, however, upon their arrival at the scene of the late action that they had retired, carrying with them most of their killed and wounded. The British followed the retreating Americans until they made the sudden turn to the left, when they gave up the pursuit and returned to the field to gather up the spoils and prepare to return to the city.

The enemy behaved in the most inhuman manner to the wounded Americans they found lying on the field, many of whom they mangled shockingly and burnt in buckwheat straw. The latter circumstance, for the sake of humanity and the credit of the English name, we would fain disbelieve, but there is such undoubted evidence to sustain it, that we are fully convinced of its truth. On the farm of Thomas Craven, in a field near the county line, was a large heap of buckwheat straw. Garret Kroeson deceased, who then lived in the neighborhood, says a skirmishing party of Americans, much fatigued, crept into this straw about sunrise in the morning, when a Tory who knew their secret resting place, informed the British. They set fire to the straw while the Americans were asleep, burnt some to death on the spot, and others were so badly burned that they died in a short time. They also set fire to the wounded, many of whom had dragged themselves to the straw for shelter, while they were yet alive, and caused them to expire in the most excruciating agony. We have abundant proof to sustain this statement. General Lacey, in his letter to General Armstrong, of the date of the 7th of May, speaks of this circumstance in the following manner: "Many of the unfortunate who fell into the merciless hands of the British, were more cruelly and inhumanly butchered. Some were set on fire with buckwheat straw, and others had their clothes burnt on their backs. Some of the surviving sufferers say they saw the enemy set fire to the wounded while yet alive, who struggled to put it out but were too weak, and expired under this torture. I saw those lying in the buckwheat straw—they made a most melancholy appearance. Others I saw, who, after being wounded with a ball, had received near a dozen wounds with cutlasses and bayonets. I can find

as many witnesses to the proof of these cruelties as there were people on the spot, and that was no small number who came as spectators." The loss of the Americans was twenty-six killed, and eight or ten wounded, most of whom fell while marching across the open fields; several prisoners were taken, but it is not known how many. The loss of the British could never be ascertained, as they carried the killed and wounded with them to the city—it must, however, have been considerable. One field officer is supposed to have fallen, and another officer was severely wounded in the knee, near the house of Thomas Craven, into which he was carried. Major Simcoe admits that some of his rangers were wounded, as was also the horse of his orderly hussar. He likewise mentions that the shoe-buckles of one Captain McGill probably saved the life of that officer. General Lacey states that he captured two of their horses, and that five were left dead on the field. Of the Americans, two officers of the patrols were killed and also a Captain Downey, who was horribly mangled, and whose obituary notice we insert. The baggage captured from the Americans was taken to Philadelphia and sold, and the proceeds divided among the men of the expedition. It yielded one dollar to each man.

The following obituary notice of Captain Downey appeared in the *Pennsylvania Packet*, in May, 1778 :

“PLUMSTEAD, *Bucks County*, May 4th, 1778.

“Among the slain near the Crooked Billet, on Friday the first instant, fell the gallant Captain Jno. Downey, late school master in Philadelphia, whose worth entitles him to a place in the annals of America. He took an active and early part in our struggle for liberty. He went as a volunteer to Jersey last winter a year, where he behaved gallantly in the battles of Trenton and Princeton. He being chosen captain of a company of Philadelphia militia, served his tour of duty, two months last summer at Billingsport, when, on account of his superior knowledge of mathematics, the Executive Council employed him to make a military survey of the river Delaware, which he performed with great exactness. Since which time he has performed many very important services to his country, a love to which prompted him to attempt any thing which promised its welfare. He lately acted as an assistant commissary, and in this capacity was with our brave militia when attacked last Friday. From his known readiness to fight and bleed for his country, it is more than probable when the attack began he attempted to join his countrymen when he was shot through the shoulder, and that he lay in his blood until the enemy returned, when they dispatched him in a cruel manner, for his body was found with one of his hands almost cut off, his head slashed in several places, his skull cut through, his brains coming out of his nose and scattered all around. He was an enlightened patriot, an affectionate friend, a gallant soldier, a fond husband and an indulgent parent. He had no inheritance to

leave, as his little property was left in Philadelphia ; but he has left a sorrowful widow, and five helpless children, in very indigent circumstances. They are worthy the notice of the charitable."

The dead were collected and buried in one grave, near where they fell, in a field along the county line, and a short distance above Craven's Corner. The wounded were carried to the house of Thomas Craven, near by, where they were well taken care of, and remained until they recovered, or were able to be removed to their own homes. After General Lacey had paid the last sad rites of humanity to the dead, and had his wounded made comfortable, he took up the line of march for the Cross-Roads, now Hartsville, where he encamped on the north bank of the Neshaminy creek, which he considered a very safe position, and of easy defence.

The following incidents, connected with the battle of the Crooked Billet, were related to us, either by those who had lived contemporaneously with that event, or by others who received them from that source, and therefore may be relied upon as correct.

When the British returned from the pursuit, they rode up to several houses in the village and asked for bread and cheese, but did not tarry a long time, from fear that the Americans might rally and attack them. They plundered some of the houses, and spread great consternation among the inhabitants. A small party of them went to the house of David Marple, a very aged man, and grandfather of Col. David Marple, of Warminster township, Bucks county, and ordered him and his family to catch and cook the chickens for them. He told them he was unable to do it, when they excused him, and ordered his sons and daughters to catch them, which they were obliged to do. They even compelled them take the setting hens from their nests.

The last British soldier was killed in a wood a short distance above what was then known as Hart's Corner, on the east side of the Bristol road. He was chasing an American named Vandyke, and had come within a few yards of him, while running through the wood. He snapped one pistol at him, which missed fire. Vandyke, in his alarm, seems not to have recollected that he carried a loaded musket on his shoulder, but was retreating as rapidly as possible, with a fair prospect of having his brains blown out by his pursuer. When the dragoon was about drawing his second pistol, it occurred to the American that his gun was loaded, and might in this critical posture of affairs do him some service. Thereupon, without any delay, he took deliberate aim at the Englishman and shot him dead ; then mounted his horse and rode away to join the main body of Americans. This inci-

dent used to be related by Captain Baird, now deceased, who was an officer in the action, and we think an eyewitness to the affair.

At this period, there lived in the neighborhood of the Billet two men named Van Buskirk, both of whom bore the title of captain ; one was noted for being a staunch Whig, and the other was quite as violent a Tory. The British knew only of the Whig, and had long been anxious to capture him, as he made himself very obnoxious by his activity in the cause of the colonies. While they were burning the buckwheat straw, many of the neighbors collected there, to see what was going on, and among the number was the Tory Captain Van Buskirk. He was known to those present, and some one of them called him by name. A British officer hearing this, immediately asked him if he was Captain Van Buskirk. He replied that he was, no doubt feeling pleased that he was thus noticed, and looked for some compliment for his services to King George. Alas! the poor man was most sadly mistaken, for he was immediately arrested and placed in irons, being mistaken for his patriotic namesake. He asserted his innocence again and again, and assured them he was the wrong person, and not the Whig Van Buskirk, whom they wanted. But his protestations had no other effect than to raise a laugh at his expense ; they could not be caught in any such trap as that, in order to allow an *arch-rebel* to escape and therefore they held on to him. His neighbors smiled and said nothing in his behalf—thinking the joke was entirely too good an one to be rectified. They hurried him off to Philadelphia with them, where they kept him in jail for some time, and treated him very badly. At last some persons in the city, who knew him, interested themselves in his behalf, and convinced his captors he was the wrong person, and not the one they wanted. Upon this they set him at liberty, and made many apologies for the injury they had done him. But it did not cure the wound. He returned home, and ever after was as staunch a Whig as his namesake. The medicine had worked a radical cure.

Soon after the British, when on their way to the scene of action, had turned into the cross-road at Lloyd's Corner, they stopped at a farm-house—now owned by Mr. William Kelly—and roused up the inmates, to procure a guide to show them the nearest way to the Billet ; they were behind their time, and in great haste. A young man living with the family put his head out of the window and demanded their business. They told him he must show them the road to the Billet, and ordered him to dress and come down immediately. He refused to until they threatened to shoot him if he did not comply with

their demand. He told them if he should accompany them, and the Americans caught him, they would certainly kill him, and that he could only show them the way on condition that they would furnish him with a fast horse, to enable him to escape if his countrymen should attempt to capture him. This they agreed to, and mounted him on a fleet animal and placed him at the head of the column. He soon found the horse he rode was a very fast one, and watching his opportunity when he was a short distance in advance, put whip to his horse and made his escape. They fired their pistols at him, which only increased his speed; and as they did not dare pursue him, for fear of falling into an ambush of the Americans, he succeeded in getting off without any difficulty. This was related to the writer by the late Judge Watts of Bucks county, who saw the man, about daylight, riding along the road which runs from the county line to the Bristol road at the top of his speed. He was without hat or coat; and my informant did not know what was the matter then, but learned the cause of it in a few days. When Judge Watts saw him he was passing through what is now the village of Davisville. An officer of Simcoe's column left his horse at the house of Isaac Boileau, a short distance above the eight-square school house, on the county line, in charge of a negro slave named Moore, and threatened terrible things against him if he should let any of the "*Rebels*," take him before his return. In a short time a retreating American, hard pressed, came that way and demanded the horse; the negro refused to give him up until the soldier made some demonstration of enforcing his modest request, when he surrendered him. The American mounted him and rode away across the fields. Not long afterward the English returned, when the officer came to inquire for his horse, which he saw was gone. The poor black was much alarmed, and as well as he could explained to him how the American had forced him to give the horse. The Englishman was in a terrible rage when he learned what had taken place, and immediately put the negro under arrest and carried him along with the troops; but he was released after traveling a few miles, and returned home in safety. This was related to the writer by an eyewitness to the transaction.

The last American killed was at Hart's Corner. In company with another man, named Cooper, he had retreated along the road which runs from Johnsville to the Bristol road. The main body was in advance of them, and they were sitting side by side on the fence at the end of the road, resting themselves before going into the wood, when two British dragoons, unobserved by them, raised the hill near the

house in which General White lately lived, and approached within range of their carbines. One of them fired his piece at the two Americans, the ball from which struck Cooper's companion, who fell off the fence dead. Cooper jumped over into the wood, and escaped. The blood remained on the fence for many years.

Isaac Tomkins relates that he was a small boy at the time of the battle, but remembers the day very distinctly. He then lived with his father, in the building in which Mr. Fretz now keeps store in Hatborough. He had just got up, about sunrise in the morning, when his sister, who had been sent into the garden to plant cucumbers, came running into the house shouting "the British are coming," when they looked out and saw a large body of red-coated dragoons marching up the road. These were part of Abercrombie's command, who made the attack in front.

The late Jonathan Delany used to mention a circumstance he witnessed. He was living at the time in Frankford, through which one detachment of the British troops passed on their return to the city. Among the prisoners was an old man, who wore on his shoes a pair of large silver buckles. They attracted the attention of a soldier who, as they were marching along the street, left the ranks and stooped down to tear them off. The old man, who was not disposed to be thus robbed of his property, struck the thief on the head with his fist and knocked him over on to the ground. The other soldiers who witnessed the act gave a loud shout in approval of the prisoner's courage.

Nathan Marple, father of Col. Marple, was then a lad about sixteen years of age, and lived with his father in the Billet. He heard the firing early in the morning, and supposing Lacey's men were getting ready to drill, started across the field to go to them. He had not got far, however, when he saw the British dragoons riding across the field toward the camp; they had cloaks on, and he could not see their red-coats. He took warning at what he saw, and returned home. He further relates, that he saw an officer ride some distance in front of his men, halt, rise up in his stirrups, and look all around as if he were reconnoitering. He immediately heard the report of a gun, and saw the officer fall to the ground. The horse, instead of running away as might be supposed at the loss of his rider, wheeled around and cantered back to his company.

Mr. Safety Maghee, of Northampton township, Bucks county, a gentleman now nearly ninety-six years of age, gave us some time ago the following as his recollection of the action at the Crooked Billet. He says :—

"In 1778 I was living with my uncle, Thomas Folwell, in Southampton township, in the house where Horatio G. Yerkes now lives. On the morning of the battle of the Billet, now Hathorough, I heard the firing very distinctly, and a black man, named Harry, and myself concluded we would go and see what was going on. I was then about thirteen years old. We started from the house and went directly toward where the firing was. When we came near where Johnsville now stands, we heard a heavy volley there, which brought us to a halt. The firing was in the woods. The British were in pursuit of our Militia and chased them along the road that leads from Johnsville to the Bristol road, and also through the fields from the Street road to the Bristol road. They overtook the militia in the woods at the corner of the Street road and the one that leads across to the Bristol road. When the firing had ceased, we continued on and found three wounded militia-men near the wood; they appeared to have been wounded by the sword, and were much cut and hacked. When we got to them they were groaning greatly. They died in a little while, and I understood they were buried on the spot. They appeared to be Germans. We then passed on, and in a field near by we saw two horses lying dead—they were British. One of them was shot in the head, and the gun had been put so near that the hair was scorched. While we were on the field, Harry picked up a cartouch box that had been dropped or torn off the wearer. Shortly after, we met some of the militia returning, and when they saw the black fellow with the cartouch box, they became very much enraged, and accused him of robbing the dead and took it away from him. These dead horses were on the farm of Col. Joseph Hart. Soon after this we returned home. The last man was killed on the Bristol road, at the end of the road that comes across from Johnsville. A British officer who was wounded in the battle was taken to the house of Samuel Irvin who lived near by. His wounds were dressed there, and he afterward returned with the troops to Philadelphia. This affair created a good deal of excitement in the neighborhood."

The news of the battle spread far and near over the country in a few hours, and many of the inhabitants were so much alarmed they hardly dared venture from home that day, until they were assured the British had returned to Philadelphia. A day or two before, a child of Samuel Flack, who lived in Doylestown, and kept the tavern where Brower's hotel now stands, had died, and was to be buried that day at Neshaminy. The people in the neighborhood were so much afraid that only four persons would venture with the corpse to the place of

burial—two young men and two young women, one of whom was a Miss Mary Doyle, afterward a Mrs. Mitchell, and mother of Mrs. Nathaniel Cornell, of Doylestown. They were all mounted on horseback, the men being armed, and carrying the coffin; and they obtained the fastest horses they could, so they might escape from the enemy if they should be pursued. When they reached the burying-ground, the two young men dismounted and buried the body, while the young women remained on horseback, to be ready to fly at the first alarm; after this duty was performed they remounted and hurried home as rapidly as possible. They could see the smoke from the burning buckwheat straw as they rode along.

As soon as General Lacey was fixed in his new camp at the Neshaminy, whither he marched from the field of battle, he ordered a general court martial, to try the officers of his scouts for disobedience of orders and neglect of duty on the morning of the surprise and attack at the Billet. It convened at camp, May the 4th, 1778, and was composed of twelve officers; Colonel Smith was President, and William Findley, afterward a distinguished politician and Member of Congress, was the judge-advocate. The two officers tried, were Lieutenant Neilson and Ensign Laughlin: the former was found guilty of the charge laid against him, and sentenced to be cashiered, which was carried into effect; the latter was acquitted and ordered to his regiment for duty. Besides these two officers, several others, both soldiers and citizens, were tried before the same court-martial, for various offences—some of them being charged with holding intercourse with the enemy. Several were found guilty, some of whom were sentenced to be whipped, and others to be confined in the jail at Lancaster.

General Lacey continued his camp at the Neshaminy, near the cross roads, until he was relieved from the command by General Potter.

Many have blamed General Lacey for the affair at the Billet; and those who were hostile to the cause of the colonies endeavored to injure his reputation, by making him responsible for the loss he sustained. This attempt, however, failed, and his conduct received the approbation of his superiors. His situation was truly a critical one, and nothing but the coolest judgment, and most determined bravery of himself and men, saved them from an entire defeat, and the probable capture of his entire force. Throughout the whole affair he shows himself to have been a man of more than ordinary capacity for command, and justly covered himself with fresh laurels. In no wise is he answerable for the sudden surprise. The place he selected for his camp was an eligible one, and of some natural defense; and he took

every precaution the evening before to obtain the earliest information of the approach of the enemy. The officers to whom he had entrusted the duty of patrolling the road leading to his camp disobeyed his orders, and instead of being out upon duty were in camp; and afterward, when they did discover the enemy in time to alarm the camp, they neglected to do so, and hence the surprise was complete. The most vigilant officers are liable thus to be deceived by their subalterns, and it would be unjust indeed to blame the commander for such inattention to duty on the part of his subordinates. From this cause General Wayne was surprised at the Paoli, a few nights after the battle of Brandywine; and many other distinguished commanders have suffered severe losses from a like cause. The only good rule by which to judge military officers is by what they accomplish; and applying this standard to General Lacey, his actions will bear the closest scrutiny. His camp of four hundred men was surprised and surrounded, at daylight, by a force of more than three times as many British troops—he had raw militia—the enemy were veterans inured to war. In spite of this disparity of force and circumstances, he formed his little Spartan band into columns, and cut his way through the enemy, with the small loss of only about thirty-five men killed and wounded. He had to march a considerable distance across an open country, and fought every foot of the way, being pressed at the same time in front and rear, and on both flanks. We are astonished he was able to extricate himself at all from his perilous situation; and it seems quite like a miracle he did not fall into the enemy's hands with his whole force. So highly was his conduct appreciated by the Executive Council, that Timothy Matlack, Esquire, the Secretary, wrote him on the 16th of May, to the following effect: "Your conduct is highly approved; and your men have justly acquired great reputation by their bravery." This commendation had some meaning; and, in addition, all the well wishers of the cause of liberty applauded the conduct of himself and his men. The enemy also tacitly acknowledged his superior skill and courage, for Lieutenant Colonel Simcoe, in his account of the expedition says they failed in the object they had in view, which was to capture General Lacey and his whole force. Hence, the British in reality, suffered a defeat, although they remained masters of the field. With this evidence before them, who will deny to General Lacey great honor as a brave and skilful officer?

20. 10. 1901



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 011 712 411 3